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ABSTRACT

Theories of assimilation which usually are used to explain the experience of white ethnic groups in America are reviewed. The melting pot theory sees all ethnic differences disappearing and the emergence of either a purely Anglo culture or a totally new American one. On the other hand, the theory of cultural pluralism describes ethnic groups as developing distinctive communities. The emerging culture explanation states that assimilation can move in two directions- toward the core culture and back to the ethnic subculture. Two examples of this type of explanation are the impact-integration theory and the Hansen theory of generations. It is argued that although the historical experience of non-white Americans has been different from that of white Americans, theories of white ethnicity can be fruitfully applied, with some modification to the non-white experience. Specifically the impact-integration theory and the Hansen theory of generations are applied to the experience of Afro-Americans. (Author)

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APPLYING THEORIES OF WHITE ETHNICITY TO THE NON-WHITE EXPERIENCE

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Paper Read at Annual Conference of the National Ethnic Studies Assembly
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Applying Theories of White Ethnicity to the Non-White Experience

All too often when we deal with ideas that are important to us, we have a way of deluding ourselves about the relative importance of these ideas, and good scholars are always on guard against this. In trying to describe and explain the nature of the society and culture of the United States, theories and ideologies[1] have in the past been confused with each other, which is the case with that long revered "theory" now referred to as the "myth" of the "Melting-Pot." In recent times more rational approaches to explaining United States culture have been attempted, and, among sociologists at any rate, new approaches to research and understanding are being attempted. Our concern, of course, is with those explanations which deal with the ethnic dimension of our life. In the past, these conceptual schemes were for the most part propositions about the assimilation of foreigners into American society and culture and included notions about the rate of assimilation, the conditions which helped or heeded assimilation, the cycles or stages of assimilation, etc. They were constructed on the basis of data which were collected, for the most part, by studying the great waves of migrants from Europe, and by whatever cause, they followed the ideologies that prevailed respecting immigration and immigrants. It may be useful to review these theories[2] very briefly and show how connected they actually were to the needs of their time.

I

The earliest writers of American culture who described what today we call the "ethnic" dimension of our life included Hector St. Jean, Crevecoeur, Harriet Martineau, and of course, Alex de Tocqueville.[3] Crevecoeur was the first to refer to United States society as a "melting-pot." For him, melting pot referred to the melting away of the cultural differences found in the different

peoples of the United States so that all become like the dominant Anglo majority. Creveceour's generalization was based upon his actual observation of the developing similarities among these people who represented different national origins. The similarity has its beginning in the allegiance paid to the political principles of the new nation. His (Creveceour's) observation was correct; his interpretation, however, was over-generalized; and finally, his romantic description became a national ideology filling the need for a substitute for a common origin myth. We all know the consequences of that; on the "scientific" level the conceptualization was enlarged to include the notion that within three or four generations, all foreigners would disappear and the progeny of foreign born would be completely "Americanized." Creveceour's blindness to the presence of the autocthonous people of this continent--the various tribes, ethnic groups and nations of American Indians--and of the great number of Africans who at the time of his writing were approaching close to a sort of bicentennial of their own arrived on these shores, merely reflected the unsightedness of the founding fathers and people of our nation.

The nativist movements and developing xenophobia coinciding with the economic riots and depressions of the 19th century are well known to us. The reality observed during that time was that in fact the progeny of so many foreigners (the Irish and Germans in particular) while giving total allegiance to this nation nevertheless retained social and cultural ties to their ancestral heritage. To meet the problem, a new explanation developed. This was encapsulated in the melting pot idea of Israel Zangwill[4] wherein melting now meant that all Americans melt into a whole new cultural creature--the "American race." Again, Zangwill talks about the peoples of the world, but consciously or unconsciously fails to see people of color.

Immigration before and even after the Quota Acts of 1921 and 1924 and the mass immigration within the country characterized the first half of the 20th century. The ethnic enclaves of cities mushroomed and reflected the "nation of nations" that the U.S. was becoming.

"Cultural pluralism," a concept first introduced by Horace Kallen in 1915 was revived in the late 30's and 40's both as an ideology and as an explanation of the observed behavior. Its implication is that ethnic groups can, should, and do, develop distinctive communities even while their members become citizens and participate in the politics and economy of the wider society. These unique structural formations exhibited varying degrees of cohesion and organization depending upon the geographical proximity of the participating individuals and the ecological propitiousness in which the group finds itself. Pluralist ideology stresses the democratic right of these groups to maintain separate identities and institutions.

During the 1950's, it became clear that while, on the one hand, visible ethnic communities continued to exist, they seemed to exist in a diminished manner. And, on the other hand, a non-spatial "communitization" of ethnics seemed to be occurring. In addition, the United States did not appear to be less "ethnic." What was happening was that United States culture, not a monolithic, fixed entity, but a vibrant and vital existent was continuing to evolve. Citizens of the United States who identified closely with visible ethnic communities, who, as often as not, were discriminated against and were denied opportunities, were nevertheless becoming "American." As groups they communicated in English, acquired the values of success and upward mobility and in various ways move in the direction of the Anglo-American cultural system which represents the system of those persons who in the past were the most successful Americans. But in dealing with those persons, the subsequent

generations of Anglo Americans do in turn deal with and consciously or unconsciously enter into accommodation patterns with the ethnic communities around them.

Assimilation, then must be seen as having two directions--toward the core culture and then back to the ethnic sub-culture. In this sense, the culture of the United States may be described as a fluctuous "emerging culture," capable of changing with the arrival of any large new immigration. Ethnic groups, as Glazer and Moynihan have said, are not merely a residual "survival from the age of mass immigration but a new social form."[5]

II

The last of the explanations, the "emerging culture" explanation, may be further developed by use of the "impact-integration" notion.[6] The more familiar term integration was taken over from mathematics and was apparently first used by Glazer as a neutral substitute for words like assimilation and acculturation. The same term was used by Bernard as follows: "Our immigrant stock and our so called 'native' stock have each integrated with the other. That is to say that each element has been changed by association with the other, without complete loss of its own cultural identity, and with a change in the resultant cultural amalgam, or civilization if you will, that is vital, vigorous, and an advance beyond its previous level. Without becoming metaphysical, let us say that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and the parts, while affected by interaction with each other, nevertheless, remain complementary but individual."[7] "Integration" as used here, following Glazer and Bernard, is located in the tradition of cultural pluralism, and it is a special aspect of "emerging culture." "Impact" refers to certain aspects of the coming together of ethnic groups. The term rings with a negative, destructive tone in that it suggests a booming

collision resulting in a violent fushion, a forced entanglement.

It is important to recognize the underlying forces, that is, the complex dynamic of this collision. The core of dominant ethnic group of society reacts territorially to the immigration of a large number of newcomers. It observes the different, sometimes mutually exclusive, cultural systems of the migrants, and perceives them, ideologically as adversaries. This "boundary crisis" may be heightened if there is competition for limited rewards, otherwise absorption may be facilitated. Territorial defensiveness takes various forms and goes on in many ways. There are, for example, a whole set of behaviors for emphasizing priority, and there are the many ways, with varying degrees of subtlety, of pressing one's own appropriateness to the country. "We belong to the land; and the land we belong to is - ours!" Depracting the newcomers, and negating their attempts at "making something of themselves," the core group generates its polar opposite--the estranged intruder. This is an important and technically correct concept--the estranged intruder. In the conflict that ensues the price demanded of the immigrant to legitimize his presence is social, economic and cultural subordination and submission. But healthy persons who have grown stronger by the choice they made to migrate, do not submit so easily. For them, freedom is too attractive a treasure to surrender. Absolutely no clear evidence exists to show an ethnic group in the United States which has ever totally submitted.[8] Race and ethnic conflicts have been and are still a very real and important part of our history; for it is out of this impacting that new syntheses evolve. The conflict is resolved in a cultural integration that changes not only the persons involved, nor even also their groups, but the whole society itself. "The effect of the collision and conflict ensuing from migratory movements which has been most attentively considered is the change in established institutions and

social organization."[9] One sees this best in the cities, where ethnic colonies persist. But it can be seen, too, in the suburbs where voluntary segregation along ethnic as well as social class lines has developed. What's more important is that it exists where it cannot be seen at least not to the naked eye. Impacting changes all the people in the society; the immigrants are changed most of all, but the earlier residents are changed too. Sociologists have provided us with general descriptions about these changes in the newcomers. They have described the confusion, the alienation and the fears that the immigrant experiences when first settling and the comfort and security he derived from moving into close physical proximity to friends and relatives. These are the immigrant communities, the foreign colonies about which we have heard. Second generation ethnics, the United States born children of immigrants, ashamed of the foreign behavior of their parents, often rejected their ancestry; others, as a defense against the overt cruel acts of prejudice directed toward them overidentified with the old culture of their parents. Many of this generation felt the pain of marginality, not knowing whether they belonged to the United States of America or to some foreign nation. In the third generation and beyond, the immigrants' progeny feel more secure in their belongingness in the United States. Marcus Lee Hansen[10] described a version of this process which he asserts is itself a form of an ancient proverb: what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember. As they become young adults, they are able, in assessing their own self resources to ask about their distinctive backgrounds and develop new interest in their ancestral heritage. The process of coming to feel at home in the United States has, for most ethnic groups been a work of generations. Fundamental reorientations have been made in their ideological systems and consequently also in their ego

identities. These changes are not just atavistic, but are facilitated by the simultaneous changes which have been occuring in the core culture as well. Earlier residents, expanding the boundaries of United States culture and society, accept its realities; and as a result of the confrontation they too have experienced ideological reorientation. Many have found that they are able not only to maintain their link with the older United States heritage but can also achieve a unity in a new emerging United States culture, which, we have called elsewhere, an "immigrant culture."

II

Having reviewed the above theories, we now face directly the question addressed by this paper. What is the efficacy of applying white ethnic theories to non-white experience which includes blacks, orientals, and native-Americans, among others? The experiences of those groups of persons has been so special, so different, so unique, that it has been argued that special theoretical explanations are required to explain their adjustment in the United States.

It is not our purpose to critically assess these arguments here. For the most part we are impresses with these arguments, and at the very least, are moved to a high degree of caution in what we are about to say. The history of black slavery in America, first of all with all of the social-psychological ramifications that slavery implies, next, the history of the extermination, forced migrations, and attempts at cultural dissemination of native-Americans and the ramifications of these activities, and thirdly, the discriminatory exclusion of Chinese during the period of therwise free migration and the subsequent denigration of Asians in this country with its ramifications, all three of these experiences are social histories which create a category

unknown in the experience of white ethnicity. They therefore require at the very least, a modification of those theories which were developed out of the study of white ethnic groups.

What makes blacks, orientals, and native-Americans, among others, a separate category is their high visibility as a result of their non-whiteness. There is little in the nature of each of these groups singly that would lead to the tying of one of these groups to the other. Their categorization is not based upon a positive identification of the characteristics of one with the other but upon the shared negation of their being non-white. The color bar therefore becomes the basis for differentiation. Not just any color, but any color other than white. In a word what these groups share in the United States is the brunt of what is now well known as institutionalized racism. There is no need to bother even discussing the biological fallacy of racism, that is, non-whiteness, but it is mentioned here because color and its consequent, visibility, continues as an irrelevant distinction which prevents whites from coming into close proximity with non-whites, socially and culturally. Thus for example, whites fail to distinguish Afro-Americans or West-Indian Americans or Gulah-Americans, all of whom are thought of as blacks. Similarly, whites fail to distinguish between different native-American groups- Apache, Mohawk, Seneca, etc. It is only since World War II and the subsequent tragedies of southeast Asia that white Americans came even to know the names of various oriental groups other than Chinese and Japanese, such as Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, etc. Nevertheless, there are continuities between the white failure to perceive social and cultural differences within each of the groups and the earlier white anglo-American failure to perceive differences between various groups from southern and eastern Europe, differences between Italians, Jews, Greeks, etc. It is for this latter reason and because of what

was said earlier in the paper about universality of theories that with a slight modification, theories of white ethnicity can be applied to the non-white experience.

Let us take the example of the Hansen theory of generations. By changing the notion of "generational differences" to 'phase' or 'stage' differences all of the other characterisitcs of the theory obtain. This may best be explained by an illustration. Whereas for the white groups the actual time taken to move from first to third generation spans a period of sixty to eighty years, there is no set time stipulated for the movement through the phases or stages. What is stipulated is that there be successive movements. So for example, it has been found, in interviews conducted by this author, that it is not uncommon for Afro-Americans to have passed through the successive stages in periods of eighteen to twenty-four months.

In the first phase, the typical respondent projects an image of taking the roles of the traditional "colored person" in American society. This involves, above all, "knowing one's place." Throughout over 300 years of blacks being in America, during mor than 200 of which they were enslaved, their roles became highly defined. During the hundred years after the formal abolition of slavery, indeed during this whole period of time, however, there were sporadic uprisings of greater or lesser intensity both in the north and in the south. In the broad theoretical formulation, these represent movement from the first to a second stage or phase, namely the phase of over-identification with one's own heritage.

More commonly, particularly during the hundred years following slavery, there were attempts at what was known as "passing" on the part of great numbers of blacks each year, and this represented movement to the second phase or stage representing "rejection of past heritage." A milder form of

this "passing" behavior was the use of hair straightners, skin lighteners, etc. (The presence at that time of self-hatred themes in the personality of black Americans was both well-known and well-documented.)

Movement to a third generation equivalent (what we are now calling stage or phase) seemed in that period to be significantly lacking. It never occurred. In more recent times, perhaps, because of the contribution of Elijah Mohammed and the Black Muslims, who, more than any other single group encouraged a positive self image among blacks with their rallying cry "Are we niggers, or are we black men?" "Black is Beautiful, Black Americans began to move more readily into the second phase of over identification with their heritage as embodied in the development of Afro-American studies, black literature, black history as well as a militant insistence on correcting American history, and in such other areas as the beginning of black industry and black commerce. The conscious attempts at improving the quality of education, at striving for equality of job opportunity, at development of political organization, and participation in political parties, all of these things seemed to have enhanced the movement of black individuals to a third stage of resolution. In this phase, Afro-Americans are now able, because of their greater security about their own appropriateness as citizens to be less radical in their militantism, and to be more understanding of earlier black behavior and less accepting of anything less than what a citizen of the U.S. deserves for themselves as well as for others.

Thus we can see that by simple modifications the concept of generation to stages or phases the Hansen theory can easily encompass the non-white experience.

Similarly the impact integration theory can be so modified. As a result of the second stage involvement of blacks with white society, for the first time large numbers of blacks are entering into new kinds of relations with

whites as 'blacks' rather than as 'blacks passing,' or as 'slaves.'" With this increase in numbers, white-Americans give black-Americans the same treatment they give to all immigrants who threaten their jobs and their security. In this way, the dominant group generates a group of "estranged intruders"--their polar opposite. The violence of the late sixties that continues even to this day, though to a lesser extent, results in a new kind of synthesis whereby the social structure of the United States is changed reflecting the inclusion of blacks on a new and different level. This is what we mean when we refer to impact-integration. Thus with the impact-integration theory, as with Hansen's generational model, minor modifications result in an applicable social theory.

What's important to note here is, that, from this prospective, the process is continuing. Indian-American groups and various Asian-American groups have really only just begun to enter into the struggle. What differs now is our interpretation and our understanding of these dynamics. As the conflict goes on, and there are those who predict that it will get worse before it gets better, that conflict must be seen for what it is, a conflict of interests and not of color or of culture. If we accept the idea that citizens have equal rights, then every group, as it joins this society, has the right to have some dimension of its culture synthesized into the culture of the United States.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cf. Brown, Robert, Explanation in Social Science, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Co., 1963 and Braithwaite, R. B., Scientific Explanation (Harper Edition), New York, Harper Publishing Co., 1960. See also the seminal work upon which these notions are founded: Mannheim, Karl, Ideology and Utopia (Harvest Ed.), New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961.

2. Gordon, Milton M., Assimilation in American Life, New York, Oxford University Press, 1964. See also E. K. Francis, Interethnic Relations, New York, Elsevier, 1976, pp. 221 ff. Cf. Yancey, William L., & Juliani, Richard N., "Emergent Ethnicity: A Review and Reformulation," American Sociological Review, June 1976, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 391-403.

3. Martineau, Harriet, Society In America (edited, abridged and with an introductory essay by Seymour Martin Lipset), Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1962 (originally published in 1834.) J. Hector St. Jean De Crevecoeur, "What Is An American?" Excerpts (from Letters from an American Farmer, published in London, 1782) reprinted in Edith Abbott, Historical Aspects of the Immigration Problem, Chicago, Ill., The University of Chicago Press, 1926, p. 418 f. De Tocqueville, Alexis, Democracy In America (originally published in Paris, 1835), Vols. I and II, New York, Vintage Books, 1955.

4. Zangwill, Israel, The Melting Pot, New York, Macmillan and Co., 1909.

5. Glazer, Nathan and Moynihan, Daniel P., Beyond the Melting Pot, Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 16.

6. I have used this notion in earlier papers and studies. See especially "The Immigrant and the Melting Pot" in Melvin I. Urofsky, Perspectives on Urban America, New York, Doubleday & Co., 1973. See also my "Ethnic Heritage and Citizenship," paper read at the White House Conference on Ethnicity and Education, Washington, D.C., 1976.

7. Glazer, Nathan, "The Integration of American Immigrants" Law and Contemporary Problems, Duke University School of Law, Spring 1956, pp. 256-269. Bernard, William S., "The Integration of Immigrants in the United States," UNESCO (mimeo) 1956, p. 2 as quoted in Gordon, op. cit, p. 68.

8. Anderson, Charles H., White Protestant Americans, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970. See what Anderson says about the Danes, "...one of the most assimilable peoples to come to this country," p. 69-71. Cf. Schooler, Carmi, "Serfdom's Legacy: An Ethnic Continuum," American Journal Sociology, Vol. 81, No. 6, May 1976, pp. 1265-1286.

9. Teggart, F. J., Theory and Processes of History, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1962 (originally published as two books by Yale University Press, 1918 and 1925), p. 196.

10. Hansen, Marcus Lee, "The Third Generation: Search for Continuity," in H. D. Stein and R. A. Cloward, Social Perspectives on Behavior, New York, The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1958, pp. 139-144. For another use of this theme see Scimecca, J. A. and Femminella, F. X., "Italian-Americans and Radical Politics" in Femminella, F. X. (ed.) Power and Class: The Italian-American Experience Today. New York, The American Italian Historical Association, 1973.